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A CONFLICT OF GENERATIONS: THE  
GENERATION GAP

Robert R. Serra

Army War College  
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania

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A CONFLICT OF GENERATIONS: THE GENERATION GAP

A Research Paper  
Presented to  
Dr. C. R. Coates of the Graduate School  
Shippensburg State College

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Course Requirements of  
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by  
Robert R. Serra

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Many of the leadership problems discussed and examined in the USAWC Study of Leadership for the Professional Soldier: Leadership for the 1970's are "reflections of inadequate communications between levels." This lack of adequate communications can be traced, I believe, to a soldier's earlier childhood and poor interpersonal relationships with his immediate family. It is generally believed and accepted that all aspects of an individual's total experience influences his thoughts, opinions and attitudes. This project was conducted to determine the attitudes and beliefs of the young and old in the problem of the so called "Generation Gap." More specifically, the research, although greatly limited, is intended to prove that there is no statistically significant difference between the attitudes and beliefs of the young and the old on this subject. Data was gathered through personal interviews, literature search, panel discussions. The results of the research show that there is a generation gap; that it can be traced to failure to communicate and the unwillingness of the older generation to listen to, or understand, the young. There is no statistically significant difference in the attitudes and beliefs of the young and the old on this subject. It would appear that improvement of communications between generations would lessen the problem of generations. It is significant to note that the "Leadership Study" concluded the need for improved interpersonal communications is a principal recommendation of many of the studies of the pressing personnel problems of today's Army.

## PREFACE

This research project was initiated as a result of my studies in the Psychology of the Late Adolescent at Shippensburg State College, Shippensburg, Pennsylvania. The "Generation Gap" was one of the numerous topics assigned for class discussion. I chose this topic because of the obvious widespread concern for today's adolescent throughout our society. It is no less a major concern within our military services. Because of the lack of current information, it was necessary to conduct original research. My grateful acknowledgement goes to my classmate, Miss Lois Miller, who gave much of her time and effort in conducting a live opinion survey, the results of which I used to analyze and prepare this paper.

The limitations of the research are recognized and acknowledged, however the responses obtained are most enlightening, although not unexpected. If this paper does nothing more than to make the reader more aware of the problems of our youth and some of its causes then it will have accomplished its purpose. Our willingness to listen attentively, understand deeply, and communicate freely would most assuredly tighten this communications gap and help lessen the problems of generations.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

America has ever been a country for the young. Here, generations of immigrant parents denied themselves for their children, and now the young seem bent on denying their parents in a concerted search for a new social, sexual, and spiritual definition. On both sides, guilt engulfs good intentions, and judgment wavers between "is" and ought.<sup>1</sup>

This is not an easy time to be a parent. We, especially the young, are in a continual quest for identity. It is believed that today's youthful rebellion, or so-called "revolution," is a quest, or search for identity, randomly applied to any loss of identification or self-image, regardless of age or profession. This quest includes not only the parents but the entire family and friends, and includes the enveloping culture of our society.

The self-identity or, even more, the self-realization of the young man implies to a large degree his replacing the preceding generation.<sup>2</sup> This is a noted aspect of a conflict of generations: the parent who sees his child's main purpose in life as the duty to execute his will or justify his existence. The child who is prevented from coming into his own, and an older generation unwilling or unable to give way, is really no less tragic than Hamlet who wished to take over from a generation unwilling to yield.

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<sup>1</sup>Erik Erickson, "The Quest for Identity," Newsweek, December 21, 1970.

<sup>2</sup>Bruno Bettelheim, "The Problem of Generations," in The Young Adult, ed. Gerald D. Winter and Eugene M. Nuss (Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1969), p. 9.

This leads me to the subject I have chosen to discuss, the so-called "Generation Gap." Latest statistics show that half of the world's population is under 25. Is it, therefore, any wonder that there is widespread concern over our youth of today? They are concerned about maintaining their individualities which are constantly being overshadowed by social pressures to conform. Is it surprising that America's moral and cultural values are undergoing profound changes which have directly affected America's youth? Our youth appear to have a deeper concern for social problems than the older generations. However, when we look around, we often ask ourselves the question: "Are today's youth genuinely concerned with reform and improvement of our society, or do they use the various issues merely as a means of rebelling against authority and establishing their own independence?"

This paper has been prompted by a desire to examine and compare the perceptions which the old and young have with regard to the Generation Gap. Isn't it simply a failure to communicate? To what extent can this absence of communications, or unwillingness to listen, be traced to a breakdown of the family and the changing roles within the family? Is the Generation Gap peculiar to today's generation or are the causes and differences similar to those experienced by the older generation 25 years ago? These questions and others have as many answers as there are people to discuss them.

The Generation Gap may represent nothing more than differences of beliefs and attitudes. The values of our youth may not have varied necessarily from those in previous generations. We, perhaps, can look

at ourselves a generation or two ago searching for our own identity, our own sense of belonging, and our own feelings of being wanted, but can we look at ourselves with the same sense of values as today's youth. The conflict of generations seems to be the basic difficulty facing our youth with focal points of conflict shown as the changing times, adults' concepts of what should be done, educational practices, adult envy of youth, and the adult construction of a world that adolescents feel is not theirs and, more importantly, a world that is poorly done. Bruno Bettelheim amplifies this latter point as he discusses the world made for the youth by the older generation. He says, "They are unhappy when they settle down to continue in a pattern of life that their parents have arranged for them, because they know it to be an empty one." He goes on further to say, "that the preceding generation wished to create such a better world makes it a worthy standard for youth. To come closer to achieving it through its own efforts proves to youth that it is gaining its own rich maturity."<sup>3</sup>

#### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study was designed to obtain the attitudes and opinions of both young and old on the question, "Is there a Generation Gap?" More specifically, what are the causes of the Gap; what are the real differences between generations; and is a Gap present within their families?

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

## HYPOTHESIS

There is no statistically significant difference between the attitudes and beliefs of the younger generation to that of the older generation on the question, "Is there a Generation Gap?"

## BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

My special interest in this subject dates back to July, 1971, as a result of a personal desire to become more knowledgeable in the problems facing today's youth. I am concerned especially about the older generation's apparent uneasiness in trying to understand its children and in our inability or unwillingness, in many cases, to communicate with them or even listen to what they are trying to tell us. My own status as a father of seven children, three of whom are teenagers, has been the driving force behind my desire to explore this problem.

I was one of a committee of six that selected this subject, as a class project, to research and present its findings to a group of graduate students. Our main topic of discussion was, "Is there a Generation Gap and, if so, what has caused it?" Because of the paucity of recent information on the subject and our desire for current thoughts on the matter with the people concerned most, a member of the committee<sup>4</sup> conducted a small opinion poll, and the committee later held a panel discussion on the problem of generations. Six people of various ages,

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<sup>4</sup>Conducted by Lois K. Miller, Graduate Student at Shippensburg State College, Pennsylvania.

backgrounds, and professions explored all facets of the subject and assisted us in generating class discussion. Questions addressed are shown at Appendix B.

This study will focus in on the results of the survey taken and address itself to the causes of the problem. The results are interesting and revealing and will be discussed in detail in Chapter III.

#### PROCEDURES USED

The opinion poll was conducted on Saturday, July 10, 1971 at Dutch Wonderland, at Dutch Haven Restaurant, at the Amish Farm and Home, in Inner-City Lancaster, and at the Park City Shopping Center, using the "man-on-the-street" approach. Both tourist areas and shopping centers were sampled in order to have responses from both lower and middle classes. The simple random sampling also included people from the eastern states of Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, Virginia, New York, and Pennsylvania. Their ages ranged from about 16 to 65. They were asked, "Is there a Generation Gap?" They also were asked to cite the causes of such a gap, if there was one; the real differences, as they saw them, between the young and the old that may have caused it; whether it affected their own family; and, if not, why not.

#### LIMITATIONS

The sample used in this study was taken from the Lancaster County tourist area and Lancaster City, Pennsylvania. Although it included people from various classes of society, races, religions, and type

occupations, it was nonetheless confined to a very small number (57) and represented the views of only people from the eastern coast states; therefore, it is not truly representative. It may even overstate the position of the Amish people. The sample was small because of the time element; because of the "man on the street" interview technique used; and because it was believed that any further sampling from the same area would only produce the same general answers as those already given. It is believed, however, because of opinions expressed by other people I have talked with from all walks of life, the same type of responses would have been given had we expanded our population in either numbers or areas. The study should support the general trend of thinking within the country as to the causes of the gap, and the real differences between generations. Although the conclusions reached are based on a small sampling of the population, they are believed to be sufficient in scope as to have general applicability to all of society.

#### DEFINITIONS OF TERMS USED

Young - Refers to those people under 30 years of age.

Old - Refers to those people 30 years of age or older.

Young Generation - Refers to the current generation of adolescence and the young adult under 30 years of age.

Older Generation--Previous Generation - Refers to my generation of about 25 years ago.

Middle Class - Refers to lower middle, middle or upper middle.

Lower Class - Refers to upper lower, and lower class.

Group - Refers to two or more people.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The problem of generations has received increased coverage in recent years. In this regard, numerous articles and books have been written on the adolescent, his behavior, problems, personal dilemmas, needs, and search for identity.

Though the greatest problem in an adolescent's life is himself, the teenage generation sees clearly enough that there are other problems facing the world and they are very much a part of these problems. They see even more clearly how these problems differ from previous generations.

In reviewing related literature on this subject, it becomes apparent almost immediately that, although there was much literature to be found on the problems of adolescence and generations, there is very little information available on the specific question posed. Further, that the information available was compiled prior to 1969 and primarily addressed the problems of the generation of the early and mid 1960s. Our committee was more interested in the problems of today. We elected, therefore, to take an opinion poll, using the "man on the street" approach, as well as present a panel discussion with participants, both young and old, and students and experts in the field, to air the many facets of the subject. Additionally, to stimulate further discussion, the class participated in a question period and a later seminar.

The panel clearly focused in on the causes of adolescent tension and the conflicts between generations. Such things as lack of understanding,

overemphasis on performance, lack of realism, ambiguity in status, lack of clarity of society, and problems caused by a crisis-ridden world were explored.

A review of a Newsweek survey<sup>1</sup> tended to confirm the opinions of the panel that the teenagers today, basically, are no different than those of previous generations. Their aspirations are similar, their wants are really no different, they admire the same types of people, they are confronted with similar types of decisions, and they are concerned about where they are going. Perhaps their attitudes and beliefs are somewhat different, but their value systems compliment those of their parents. The methods they use to solve their problems are different because times have changed as they have changed for generations past. While today's youth may be ill-equipped, in terms of rapidly advanced technology, an ever-increasing domination of life by science and automation, as suggested by Gordon Allport,<sup>2</sup> to handle the problems of a whirlwind society, they must learn to cope with the problems of a vastly changing world, as their parents have had to learn to do with the current generation. Maybe, as Bruno Bettelheim says, "It may be that the problem of generations is what gives us adults so much trouble, and not the problems of adolescence or youth."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>"The Teen-Agers," Newsweek, March, 1966.

<sup>2</sup>Gordon W. Allport, "Values and Our Youth," in The Person in Psychology (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961, 1968).

<sup>3</sup>Bruno Bettelheim, "The Problem of Generations," in The Young Adult, ed. Gerald D. Winter and Eugene M. Nuss (Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1969), p. 9.

The results and analysis of the opinion poll, to include causes and differences between generations, will be addressed in Chapter III. Since similar surveys are not available, I am unable to compare the results; therefore, further discussion of related literature would not be of any significance to the question posed.

## CHAPTER III

### PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

As was previously discussed, the purpose of this study is to obtain the attitudes and opinions of the young and old on the subject of the Generation Gap.

To discover the perceptions held by these two different groups, an opinion poll was conducted from people at random in a given area of Pennsylvania in July, 1971.

The Lancaster tourist area was chosen for sampling because people from many areas and of various occupations congregate there in the summer. The interviews took place as follows: 22 (11 young--11 old) at Dutch Wonderland; eight (all young) at Dutch Haven Restaurant; 10 (2 young--8 old) at the Amish Farm and Home; and 17 (7 young--10 old) at Inner-City Lancaster and shopping area, for a total of 57 people. Not all of the people sampled were interviewed separately. For example, of the 57 people, 16 were interviewed separately and 41 were interviewed within 19 different groups consisting of two or more people. This represents an overall total of 35 groupings. This breakout is significant since I will use this particular group breakout in presenting my data at Table 3.

The hypothesis under test is usually that the two groups differ with respect to some characteristic and, therefore, with respect to the relative frequency with which group members fall in several categories. The null hypothesis was tested for this sampling by using the  $\chi^2$  test

for two independent samples and the following method:<sup>1</sup>

$$\chi^2_{\text{obs}} = \sum_{i=1}^2 \sum_{j=1}^3 \frac{(O_{ij} - E_{ij})^2}{E_{ij}}$$

where  $O_{ij}$  = observed number of cases categorized in  $i^{\text{th}}$  row of  $j^{\text{th}}$  column

$E_{ij}$  = number of cases expected under  $H_0$  to be categorized in the  $i^{\text{th}}$  row of  $j^{\text{th}}$  column

The hypothesis  $H_0$  (there is no difference) will be rejected and  $H_1$  (there is a difference) will be accepted if:

$$\chi^2_{\text{obs}} > \chi^2_{2df .05} \quad \text{or} \quad \chi^2_{\text{obs}} > 5.99^{\text{fn2}}$$

TABLE 1

Observed Frequencies on the question:  
Is there a Generation Gap?

	Yes	No	Sometimes	Total
Old	19	6	5	30
Young	17	1	9	27
Total	36	7	14	57

<sup>1</sup> Sidney Siegel, Nonparametric statistics: For the Behavioral Sciences (New York, Toronto, London: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1956).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Table C, Table of Critical Values of Chi Square, p. 249.

TABLE 2

Expected Frequencies<sup>3</sup> on the question:  
Is there a Generation Gap?

	Yes	No	Sometimes	Total
Old	18.95	3.7	7.4	30
Young	17.05	3.3	6.6	27
Total	36	7	14	57

$\chi^2_{obs} = 4.68$  which is less than  $\chi^2_{2df .05} = 5.99$ , therefore the null hypothesis that there is no difference in the expressed attitudes and beliefs of the young and old on the question, "Is there a Generation Gap?," was not rejected at the .05 probability level and thus was accepted.<sup>4</sup>

Tables 1 and 2 showed the observed and expected frequencies for young and old. Table 3 shows only the observed frequencies by social class groups.

TABLE 3

Observed Frequencies by Class Groups on the questions:  
Is there a Generation Gap and  
is it present in your family?

	Yes	No	Sometimes	In Family	
				Yes	No
Middle Class	13	1	12	8	18
Lower Class	6	2	1	3	6
Total	19	3	13	11	24

<sup>3</sup>The WANG Calculator was used to compute chi-square value.

<sup>4</sup>Siegel, op. cit.

It is interesting to note the great difference in responses given by the middle class group in the sometimes category as compared with that of the lower class group. In almost all of these particular instances, the groups interviewed did not fully agree amongst themselves and were not really sure there was a Generation Gap. Conversely, in all cases but one in the lower class group, there was complete agreement on the answers given.

The various responses to a follow-on question for those people who responded yes to the Generation Gap question as to the causes of the gap are as follows:

#### Causes

- Parents are too busy
- Parents aren't honest
- Parents can't communicate
- Younger generation won't take advice
- Parents are afraid to give children choices
- Parents and kids don't understand each other
- Parents have gotten away from the Bible
- Parents give in too much
- Parents substitute things for attention
- Children are not taught properly
- There is disagreement on what teenagers may do
- Parents don't treat kids like adults
- Parents don't care
- Parents can't adjust to changing times

- Parents and kids don't spend any time together
- Parents don't give kids enough freedom
- Differences of opinion
- Kids won't do what they are told
- Parents are too strict or too lenient

The major causes of the gap were found to be a failure on the part of both parents and children to communicate with each other and lack of understanding.

The real differences between the opinions of the young and old on what creates this Generation Gap are shown as follows:

#### Differences

- Parents are materialistic, young are not
- Parents don't think like kids
- Parents work; younger generation has everything given to them
- Children want to choose for themselves
- Children want to do opposite of parents' wishes
- Type of freedom
- Dress
- Attitudes
- Application of principles
- Mores
- Parents can't accept change.
- Kids want parents to listen and they don't
- Children are better educated and are able to think for themselves

- Language, or ability to communicate
- Parents and kids can't get along

The major differences were found to be the kids' desire to choose for themselves and that the parents are unwilling to accept change.

When those people, who said that the Generation Gap was not in their families, were asked why it wasn't present, they responded as follows:

- We talk to one another
- God
- We're different
- We get along
- We like each other

The overwhelming majority felt that the reason it was not in their family was because they talked to one another.

## CHAPTER IV

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to determine the attitudes and beliefs of the young and the old on the problem of the so-called "Generation Gap." More specifically, the study is intended to prove that there is no statistically significant difference between the attitudes and beliefs of the young and the old on the question, "Is there a Generation Gap?"

For the past decade, there has been widespread concern over the problems of our youth. They are constantly being asked to conform to "yesterday's" standards when in fact they seek their own identity and wish to establish their own independence.

This paper was written because of my own personal interest in the problems of adolescent children. My role as a father of seven children, to include three teenagers, has made me question the wisdom of those who believe there is no Generation Gap. My readings on the subject, my own personal exposure to the problems of teenagers, the panel discussion, and the opinion poll all confirm my belief that there is no significant difference between the young and the old on the question of, "Is there a Generation Gap?"

The questions addressed in the first chapter of this study can be answered without qualification. Yes, there is a Generation Gap; it can be traced to a failure to communicate and to the unwillingness of the old to listen to the young. The Generation Gap is not peculiar to

today's generation. The same basic problems, of perhaps a lesser magnitude, were prevalent in our generation 25 years ago, albeit the world we lived in then was far less complex than the one we live in today.

This study was based on a random sampling of people from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. It is felt that the small number of people sampled (57) has not invalidated the results obtained because the nature of the questions asked and the wide range of responses given tend to support the opinions of various authors who have studied the young adult.<sup>1</sup>

It is significant to note that the major causes of the Generation Gap are the failure to communicate and the lack of understanding. This is true for both parents and children and shows up in the majority of the families of those sampled.

In conclusion, the null hypothesis that there is no statistically significant difference in the attitudes and beliefs of the young and the old on the question, "Is there a Generation Gap?", has been accepted.

It would appear that improvement of communications between young and old and parent and child would contribute much to the elimination of this so-called "Gap" and lessen the problems of generations.

George Bernard Shaw once said that youth was a thing too wonderful to be wasted on the young. Are we willing to accept this? It is doubtful too many people would agree with him.

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<sup>1</sup>"The Young Adult," Identity and Awareness, ed. Gerald D. Winter and Eugene M. Nuss (Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1969).



ROBERT R. SERRA  
Lieutenant Colonel, AGC  
Author of "The Conflict of Generations:  
The Generation Gap"

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## APPENDIX A

### List of Occupations of People Surveyed

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Number</u>
Student	15
Self-Employed	1
Factory Worker	2
Cashier	1
Salesman	2
Furniture Manufacturer	1
Quality Control Supervisor	1
Teacher/Professor	2
Brick-layer	1
Housewife	16
Government Analyst	1
Mechanic	1
Lab Technician	1
Engineer	1
Attorney	2
Driver Instructor	1
Construction Engineer	1
WAVE	1
Clerk	4
Pastor	1
Drop-out	1

## APPENDIX B

### Panel Discussion Questions

#### (Generation Gap Group)

1. Is there a "Generation Gap" and, if so, what has caused it?
2. It's generally believed that all aspects of an individual's total experience influences his thoughts, opinions, and attitudes. How much influence does the family, the peer group, the school, and the church have on adolescents and what is the relationship of each to the "generation gap."
3. America's moral and cultural values are undergoing some profound changes. Are there basic, major differences in the values held by the younger generation from those of the older (over 30) generation? If so, what are they?
4. Is the "generation gap" peculiar to today's generation? Are there causes or characteristics of the generation gap today which make it wider than before?
5. Young people are often heard denouncing the "hypocrisy" of the older generation. Is it true? If so, in what ways?
6. What influence has mass communications media had in either closing or widening the "generation gap"?
7. Are protesters which we see and hear in mass rallies representative of most youth or, are they merely a vocal minority being influenced by a few extreme radical organizations?
8. In which areas of our society and life are today's youth most dissatisfied, and why?
9. Are today's youth genuinely concerned with reform and improvement of our society or do they use these issues merely as a means of rebelling against authority and of establishing their own independence?
10. Do you feel the average adolescent is more insecure about his identity than he was 20 years ago? If so, why?
11. How can adolescents best influence change to improve our society?
12. What can parents and others of the "over 30" generation do to close the gap and increase communications with the younger generation?
13. What can adolescents do to achieve mutual understanding between themselves and their parents or others in authority?